

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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**Testimony of
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Before the
Child Poverty Council
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Good evening Secretary Ryan and members of the Poverty Council. My name is Leslie Gabel-Brett and I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. Thank you for this opportunity to testify about policies to reduce child poverty in our state. I have been impressed and energized by the ideas and discussion generated by the members of the Council, the invited experts and members of the public who have participated in roundtable meetings across the state.

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women is very interested in the work of this Council because the majority of people living in poverty in our state are mothers and their children. If there is one message we want to deliver clearly it is that *children are poor because their parents are poor*. And their parents are poor more often than not because they lack the skills and infrastructure around them to get and keep a job that leads to economic self-sufficiency. By skills, we mean adequate literacy and math proficiency and a specific job skill that leads to decent employment. By "infrastructure," we mean the work supports that are necessary to make a low to moderate wage job lead to economic security – affordable childcare, secure health care, transportation. Having a decent place to live at a reasonable price is also essential.

As you may know, nearly half the people currently receiving TANF benefits in our time-limited program do not have a high school diploma. Yet without a high school diploma, it is nearly impossible to secure a job. If we want to unlock the door for these parents and their children, we must invest in basic adult education for them, including English as a Second Language, and skill training in occupations that lead to higher wage

employment. In order for adult education to be successful, it must be provided at the right times and places for adult learners, and it should be tied to occupational opportunities.

The link between education and training and economic success is clear. The Center for Law and Social Policy released a report entitled *Built to Last: Why Skills Matter for Long-Run Success in Welfare Reform*¹ in which they summarize the results of numerous national studies and Census data that demonstrate the link. For example, one national study of welfare recipients found that each year of schooling beyond high school increased wages by about 7 percent.² Census data from 1999 show that women with an associate degree earn more than twice as much as those without a high school diploma (about \$24,000 annually compared to about \$11,000) and 37 percent more than those with only a high school diploma (who earn about \$17,000).³

We strongly urge the poverty council to recommend increased investment in adult basic education, ESL, and job training, coupled with adequate work supports such as childcare. We know it works.

I would also like to comment briefly about the state Earned Income Tax Credit and other tax policy proposals. Some people have suggested that tax policy is not an appropriate subject matter for the Child Poverty Council. Yet our nation and our state have a rich history of adjusting tax policy in order to promote a common good. Two of the most well-known such tax policies are the home mortgage tax deduction, enacted to help families enter the middle class by purchasing a home, and the tax deduction for charitable giving. If tax policies are good medicine for the middle class, why should they be off-limits for low-income families? The goal of ameliorating child poverty is as urgent and socially significant as the goals of these other tax policies.

The experts who testified during the invited presentation were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the EITC as the most tested, successful policy for helping lift low-income families out of poverty. The federal EITC has had bi-partisan support since its inception. We urge you to support this recommendation.

We also urge you to support the inclusion of the state's Self-Sufficiency Standard as a tool for those who are counseling low-wage job seekers, and as a benchmark of our success in helping families make ends meet. As you know, the Federal Poverty Level is an outdated measure that does not take into account the actual costs of childcare or health care, and it is the same number in Connecticut as it is in Mississippi. We owe it to the families who are struggling to pay the bills, and to those of us who are shaping state policies, to use a measure that accurately reflects the cost of living in Connecticut.

¹ Karin Martinson and Julie Strawn, Center for Law and Social Policy, April, 2003.

² *Ibid.*, citing Corcoran, M., & Loeb, S. (2001) Welfare, work experience, and economic self-sufficiency. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 20(1); see also Kane, T. J., & Rouse, C. E. (1995, June) Labor market returns to two and four year college. *American Economic Review*.

³ *Ibid.*, citing U.S. Census Bureau. (2000, December). Table 9: Earnings in 1999 by educational attainment for people over 18 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: March 2000. Washington, DC: Data cited is for females between the ages of 25 and 64, with earnings.

I believe that we know a great deal about what it takes to reduce poverty, and the process of fact-finding and deliberation in this Council has helped to focus our understanding. We need to build a ladder with sturdy rungs so that people can climb up it to economic security. People need the basic skills to get a decent job, and affordable supports such as childcare, health care, transportation and housing so that a decent job can become a decent way of life. Thank you.

